

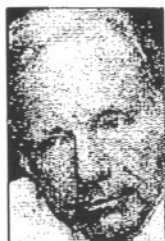
Plan offered to protect LI Sound coast

By **KATHERINE HUTT SCOTT**
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WASHINGTON — Congressional lawmakers from states bordering Long Island Sound proposed Tuesday that the federal government spend \$40 million a year to buy and protect wildlife habitat, open space and recreational sites along the threatened estuary.

A bipartisan group of lawmakers from Connecticut and New York introduced identical bills in the House and Senate that would create an advisory committee to recommend which pieces of land to acquire. A major goal would be to increase public access to the sound, which contributes about \$6 billion annually to the local economy through tourism and commercial fishing.

The land stewardship program would be voluntary, and private owners of coastal land would have the option of not selling. They



Lieberman

also could opt to enter into agreements to conserve their land or require that future owners protect it.

The sound is a major ecosystem for marine life, provides important habitat for migrating and breeding birds and is home to 125 bird species, including the endangered piping plover, according to the National Audubon Society, which applauded the proposed stewardship program.

"In recent years, the pressures on the sound have grown," said Rep. Rob Simmons, R-Stonington, who introduced the House legislation with Rep. Steve Israel, D-N.Y. "Access to the water has diminished."

Both development and non-native species are threatening the sound's shores.

Less than 20 percent of the coast is accessible to the public, said David Miller, executive director of Audubon New York.

Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., the chief Senate sponsor of the legislation, said the advisory committee would use satellite data and computers to evaluate the biodiversity and recreational potential of each piece of land.

"This bill uses new-age approaches to take on the age-old problem of conservation," Lieberman said during a news conference announcing the legislation.

Lieberman introduced a similar bill in April. When the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee discussed it last month, committee chairman Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., expressed concern about property owners' rights.

After consulting with Simmons and other members of the House, Lieberman modified his bill to address those concerns, his

spokeswoman, Casey Aden-Wansbury, said.

All four senators from Connecticut and New York support the measure. So do all five House members from Connecticut and eight of the 29 House members from New York.

The accord announced Tuesday marks a truce in the squabbling that has taken place between the two delegations over the past year regarding other issues involving the sound. Those issues include the dumping of material dredged from Norwalk Harbor on the border between the two states, and the Cross Sound Cable, which connects the electric transmission grids of New England and Long Island.

"We put our differences aside to take the right side for the sound," Israel said.

The rare display of teamwork should help the legislation move through Congress, even though it was introduced late in the congressional session, said Tim Profeta, Lieberman's counsel for the environment.